

The Six Ages of History and the Renewal of the Human Person: Christian Humanism in Bede's Gospel Homilies

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2.1 Introduction

The Venerable Bede (673–735) personified the monastic intellectual culture of the early Middle Ages. His pedagogical works provided the rudiments of a liberal arts education to monks in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria. In his historical and hagiographical writings he narrated the religious history of his native country in the persons of its kings, saints and foreign benefactors such as Gregory the Great. In his exegetical works he devoted himself to preserving the patristic heritage and making it accessible to his brother monks. Bede's Gospel homilies are the fruit of his exegetical labors. Do to their practical goal of facilitating moral and spiritual formation, Bede's homilies provide a promising venue for an exploration of Christian humanist themes. They are addressed to a very specific audience: the monastic community at Wearmouth and Jarrow. Situated within this context, they exhibit a consistent preoccupation with spiritual formation, which in turn engages the human person in all his or her faculties: body and soul, memory and affections. In several of his homilies Bede alludes to Augustine's six ages of history, incorporating them into his vision of monastic formation in such a way that history itself becomes an instrument of this personal formation, consisting in the recovery and restoration of those personal faculties that have been wounded by sin and are now redeemed in Christ.

2.2 Defining "Humanism"

Before we proceed any further, we need to understand humanism as it would have made sense to Bede in his own historical situation. There is a tendency to see humanism operating in the works of Jerome, Augustine, and Cassiodorus, only to watch it wane into virtual non-existence by the 6th century, as seen in the

decidedly non-literary, non-reflective prose of writers such as Gregory of Tours (c. 538–594). Thus, scant attention is paid to the humanism of early medieval writers such as Bede. However, T.R. Eckenrode, maintains that humanism is present in Bede's writings. His exegetical works, he argues, demonstrate Bede's grasp of the pastoral responsibilities and sensitivities required of an effective preacher, particularly the "reflective self-appropriation of the Christian ethic" which enabled the "priest-preacher" to connect with his audience.¹ This, argues Eckenrode, justifies considering Bede a Christian humanist.² I propose to examine two of Bede's homilies, exploring them not only in terms of Eckenrode's pastoral concerns but also in terms of the primal wisdom inherent in creation. It is this inherent wisdom that makes religious humanism a perennial humanism found in every age of Christianity. Christian thinkers of every historical period sought to grasp, at least implicitly, some portion of this primal wisdom. This chapter will uncover the implicit Christian humanism of Bede as it pertains to his view of the human person as a microcosm and how this is reflected in his understanding of the six ages of history. This understanding, in turn, will be viewed in relation to the monastic spiritual formation of Bede's day.

The intellectual culture in which Bede lived and wrote was decidedly monastic. Monastic culture had as its goal the contemplation of God. It was toward this goal that all the resources of the monastic life were directed, including intellectual culture. Dom Jean Leclercq, in his classic study of monastic culture, describes the monastic setting as "a type of Christian culture with marked characteristics: a distinterested culture which was 'contemplative' in bent."³ The reading of the Bible, the Church Fathers, and the works of classical antiquity as well as the mastery of various literary arts, such as grammar, rhetoric, and poetic meter, were all part of a comprehensive program of personal formation that oriented the monk to a life of contemplation. This formation presupposed a certain understanding of the human person, a Christian anthropology derived principally from Augustine. In Augustine's view of the human person, body and soul originally enjoyed a natural complementary and harmony, the body serving the dictates of the soul governed by reason, which in turn submitted to the dictates of God. This harmony, however, had been

1 T.R. Eckenrode, "The Venerable Bede and the Pastoral Affirmation of the Christian Message in Anglo-Saxon England," *The Downside Review* 99 (1981), 261ff.

2 Ibid., 274.

3 *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: 1982), 2. As a treatment of the profoundly humanistic culture that produced the great works of monastic theology, Leclercq's study is unsurpassed.

disrupted by sin. As the soul no longer served God, so the body no longer served the good of the rational, well-ordered soul but rather the sinful soul's disordered appetites.⁴ The monastic regimen was a way of re-orienting and re-ordering the soul, and thus had as its goal the recovery of that primal harmony within the person that had been lost due to sin. Benedict's *Rule* makes this recovery the goal of monastic formation. In the monk who has made progress on "the twelve steps of humility," his outward appearance and conduct manifest an inward moral and spiritual disposition. When the monk speaks, he must speak "gently and without laughter, humbly and seriously, in few and sensible words."⁵ His outward speech is to exhibit his inward character, his verbal reservation reflecting the self-abnegation of his inner person. When the monk has been perfected in humility, this humility must be seen not only in his speech but in all that he does, in every place: "at the Work of God, in the oratory, in the monastery, in the garden, on the road, in the fields."⁶ The personal formation of the monk therefore must be integrated with all that the monk does.

The primary intellectual exercise wherein this formation of the person of the monk took place was the practice of *lectio divina*: the prayerful, meditative reading of Sacred Scripture.⁷ Such a reading entailed the methodical, repetitive memorization of a biblical text for the purpose of internalization and, ultimately, personal transformation. Such transformation was the outcome of an encounter between the reader and the divine author of scripture. In the words of Duncan Robertson, *lectio divina* is "an intimate dialogue with a living, present, divine interlocutor who will answer when the reader appeals to him."⁸ In this dialogue, the "spiritual" sense of scripture inherited from the Church Fathers determined the parameters of textual interpretation, giving rise to a highly individualized meaning which nevertheless rooted the monk in salvation history. The order of interpretation consisted of identifying different levels of meaning. The first, most basic level was the literal or historical meaning. This involved the identification of grammar, rhetorical figures and tropes, and

4 *De civitate Dei*, 13.13 (*City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson [London: 2003], 522–3).

5 *Regula Sancti Benedicti*, 7 (*Rule for Monasteries*, trans. Leonard J. Doyle [Collegeville, MN: 1948]), 27.

6 Ibid. For a fuller discussion of this, particularly Benedict's use of rhetoric in effecting this transformation, see the author's "The Transformation of Desire in the Rule of St. Benedict" in *Rhetoric in the Monastic Tradition: A Textual Study* (New York: 2012).

7 For an excellent study of the role of reading, memorization and meditation in medieval monastic spirituality, see Duncan Robertson, *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading* (Collegeville, MN: 2011).

8 Ibid., xii.

factual history.⁹ Next followed the allegorical meaning, which consisted of reading the text in such a manner as to perceive therein the truths of the Catholic faith, primarily in reference to the nature and role of the Church.¹⁰ Distinct, yet closely connected with allegory was anagogy, the consideration of last things and the kingdom of heaven.¹¹ Finally, there was the tropological meaning, which consisted of the moral teaching to be derived from the text. This seems to have been the apogee of scriptural interpretation within the monastic cloister. According to Robertson, "Tropology, the final step, translates the exposition of doctrine in the allegory into moral teaching expressed in general or communal terms, which are ultimately focused upon the conduct of the individual."¹² Through the practice of *lectio divina*, the individual monk experienced personal transformation through the internal, spiritual digestion of the sacred page.¹³ Such personal transformation through the prayerful, meditative reading of scripture, a practice that engaged the whole person of the monk, was the heart of monastic Christian humanism.

Bede was thoroughly embedded in the monastic culture of Anglo-Saxon England, and thus shared this commitment to the recovery of the harmony of the person for the sake of enjoying the divine life. Of all his writings, his Gospel homilies most clearly manifest this commitment. His homilies are the fruit of Bede's own *lectio divina*, his own spiritual interpretation and internalization of Sacred Scripture for the purpose of personal transformation. This chapter proposes to examine two of his homilies that explicitly employ Bede's understanding of the six ages of history. While Bede understood himself primarily as a biblical exegete and transmitter of the patristic tradition, he also demonstrated an historical consciousness unusual for his day, as seen in his *Reckoning of Time* and his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. We would expect this consciousness to impact his attention to the spiritual formation of his brother monks. In addition, integral to Bede's understanding of the spiritual significance of history is his understanding of the human person as a microcosm, a

9 Ibid., 40–41.

10 Ibid., 42.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Monastic theology uses the image of mastication, of chewing, tasting, and digesting to express this internalization of the text for the purpose of personal transformation. Robertson writes, "The medieval writers, we recall, conceive the activity of reading in alimentary metaphors; the reader 'tastes' the words of Scripture on the 'palate' of the heart, or indeed literally in the mouth as he or she pronounces them; one has then to 'chew' the text thoroughly and 'digest' it, that is to say, proceed toward interpretation and personal appropriation" (31).

“smaller universe.” After we understand Bede’s microcosmic view of history, we can examine this view within his homilies, which will reveal the role that a theological understanding of history plays in his commitment to personal, spiritual formation. Such an understanding is the key to Bede’s Christian humanism.

2.3 The Human Person as Microcosm

One of the essential components of medieval humanism identified by Richard Southern is the “systematic intelligibility” of the created order.¹⁴ “Since God is the creator and upholder of both human and cosmic nature,” he writes, “a similar intelligibility and sentiment must...characterize the nature of God and His relationship with the Creation.”¹⁵ Such intelligibility was rooted in the doctrine of the human person as a microcosm: “that mankind, alone of all created creatures, is composed of all the elements that make up the universe.”¹⁶ From this it followed that the human person “is so constructed as to be able to understand everything about the composition of the universe.”¹⁷ This concept of the human person as a microcosm was derived from the classical philosophical tradition. The word *kosmos* originally meant “order,” specifically the order which the Greeks observed in the universe, contrasted with the chaos out of which the universe had been created.¹⁸ It also connoted beauty and fitness, since to the Greek mind the order of the universe was at the same time something to be admired for its beauty.¹⁹ From here the word took on the meaning “world-order” and then simply “world.”²⁰ Soon there came to be recognized a harmonious likeness between the order of nature and that within the human person. The term microcosm was first applied to the human person by Democritus (460–370 BC).²¹ In his *Timaeus*, Plato alludes to an analogous relationship between the physical world and the body of the human person

14 R.W. Southern, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe*, vol. 1 (Oxford: 1995), 30.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 30–31.

17 Ibid.

18 W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: 1965), 110.

19 Ibid., 208n1.

20 Ibid.

21 W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: 1965), 471. The fragment, identified by Kathleen Freeman, simply reads, “Man is a universe in little (*Microcosm*).” *Ancilla to The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge MA: 1970), 99.

corresponding to the spiritual likeness between the world soul and the individual soul.²² In Plato's *Philebus*, Socrates argues that the elements composing the human body are fragments derived from the elements of the universe.²³ In the *Republic*, Plato maintains that the true philosopher is one who is able both to comprehend this macrocosmic-microcosmic harmony and to order himself accordingly:

Contemplating things which are in due sequence and immutable, which neither do nor suffer wrong but are all in order (*kosmos*) and governed by reason, he will reflect them, and so far as possible become assimilated to them... Hence the philosopher through association with what is divine and orderly (*kosmios*) becomes divine and orderly (*kosmios*) in so far as a man may.²⁴

By contemplating the order within the universe, the philosopher is able to re-order his own life according to that supreme order that governs all creation. Thus, the natural order within the universe is the basis for the moral order within the human person. This idea was given further systematic treatment by Plotinus (240–270 AD). In his cosmology, which posits a triad of “the One, the Intelligence, and the world-soul,” Plotinus observes a corresponding order in the human person.²⁵ The human soul is divided into a higher region, focused on purely spiritual, unchanging realities, a lower region corresponding to the mundane, mutable things of the created order, and an intermediate region.²⁶ On this basis, Plotinus writes “We are each an intelligible world.”²⁷ The wise person is one who recognizes this order and orders their own life accordingly.

We find this microcosmic view of the human person in several of the Church Fathers. In his *Exhortation to the Greeks* Clement of Alexandria (150–215 AD) uses this idea in connection with the Incarnation: “He who sprang from David and yet was before him, the Word of God, scorned those lifeless instruments of lyre and harp. By the power of the Holy Spirit He arranged in harmonious order this great world, yes, and the little world of man too, body and soul together; and on this many-voiced instrument of the universe He makes music to God,

22 Donald Levy, “Macrocosm and Microcosm,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (ed.) Paul Edwards, vol. 5 (New York: 1967), 121–5.

23 Ibid.

24 Plato, *Republic*, 500c, quoted in Guthrie, vol. 1, 210.

25 Ibid., 21.

26 Ibid., 21–22.

27 Plotinus, *Enneads*, 3.4.3, 284, quoted in George P. Conger, *Theories of Macrocosms and Microcosms in the History of Philosophy* (New York: 1922), 22.

and sings to the human instrument.”²⁸ Gregory Nazianzen (330–390) echoes this idea in his oration *On Holy Pascha*. When God created the universe, he created two distinct modes of conscious being: mind and sense, which “silently praised the greatness of his works and were heralds sounding afar.”²⁹ The one existed in the angels, the other in brute beasts. Nowhere, however, were the two combined in one creature, a combination which would have fully manifested the magnificence of the Creator:

So then wishing to manifest this, the Creator Word also makes one living creature out of both, I mean invisible and visible natures, that is the human being. And having taken the body from the matter already created, he breathed in breath from himself, which is surely the intelligent soul and the image of God of which Scripture speaks. The human being is a kind of second world, great in smallness, placed on the earth, another angel, a composite worshiper, a beholder of the visible creation, an initiate into the intelligible, king of things on earth, subject to what is above, earthly and heavenly, transitory and immortal, visible and intelligible, a mean between greatness and lowliness.³⁰

While not specifically using the term, Gregory the Great (540–604) echoes Gregory Nazianzen’s microcosmic understanding of the human person. The person possesses within himself a mortal, physical nature and an immortal, spiritual nature: “Now, since man was created midway between angels and beasts, to be lower than the one and higher than the other, he has something in common both with the highest and with the lowest. His spirit shares immortality with the angels, and with animals he is doomed to bodily death.”³¹ Isidore of Seville (560–636), the encyclopedist of the early Middle Ages, explicitly used classical terminology, referring to the human person as “another world, created from the universality of things in an abbreviated fashion.”³² He also held to the view, shared by many of his contemporaries, that the four elements of the earth correspond to the four humors of the human body.³³ Bede incorporates Isidore’s view when he discusses the four seasons of the year. Each season has

28 *The Exhortation to the Greeks*, trans. G.W. Butterworth (Cambridge, MA: 1953), I.

29 *Oration 45: On Holy Pascha* in *Festal Orations*, Nonna Verna Harrison, trans. (Yonkers, NY: 2008), 166.

30 *Ibid.*

31 *Dialogue Four* in *Saint Gregory the Great: Dialogues. The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 39 (New York: 1959), 192.

32 Conger, 34.

33 *Ibid.*

its own “temperament” corresponding, on the one hand, to the four elements of the universe, and on the other hand to the four temperaments or “humors” of the human body. First he describes the temperaments of the seasons. Winter is “cold and wet”; spring is “wet and warm”; summer is “warm and dry”; autumn is “dry and cold.”³⁴ He continues:

And man himself, who is called “microcosm” by the wise, that is, “a smaller universe” (*minor mundus*), has his body tempered in every respect by these same qualities; indeed each of its constituent humours imitates the manner of the season in which it prevails.³⁵

Bede specifically employs the term “microcosm” to describe the relationship between the human person and the natural order. In addition, the nature of each of the successive seasons is found in human nature. Even on a purely natural level there is a sequential dimension in human nature, reflecting the fact that the human person is a time-constituted creature. We shall see how Bede further develops this idea in his discussion of the six ages of history.

2.4 The Six Ages of History

Bede gives his fullest discussion of the six ages of history in two of his works: *The Reckoning of Time* and *On Genesis*. The primary purpose of *The Reckoning of Time* is to set forth the basic requirements for computing the correct date of Easter. In addition to this basic pedagogical function, however, it discusses the various divisions of time (hours, weeks, months), phases of the moon, the six days of creation, and the six ages of the world. It also includes an extensive chronology wherein Bede synthesizes pagan, biblical, and post-biblical events up to his own day. The work is an elaborate exposition of the theological significance of history, at the center of which is the doctrine of the six ages, which Bede derives almost entirely from Augustine. Bede employs Augustine's three-fold parallelism involving the six days of creation, the six ages of history, and the six “ages” in the life of an individual. While Augustine does not explicitly use the term “microcosm” or *minor mundus*, the idea is implicit in his schema.³⁶ Bede employs Augustine's view while making the microcosmic aspect explicit:

34 *De temporum ratione*, 35 (*The Reckoning of Time*, trans. Faith Wallis [Liverpool: 1999], 100).

35 *Ibid* (Wallis, 100–1).

36 *De Genesi contra manicheos*, 1.23.35–41 (*On Genesis Against the Manichees*, trans. Roland J. Teske [Washington, D.C.: 1990], 83–88). Augustine's doctrine of the six ages is representative

We have mentioned a few things about the Six Ages of this world, and about the Seventh and Eighth [Ages] of peace and heavenly life above, by way of comparison to the first week, in which the world was created. Here I will discuss the same subject somewhat more extensively, comparing it to the ages of man, whom the philosophers are accustomed to call “microcosm” in Greek, that is, “smaller universe” (*minor mundus*).³⁷

The successive ages of history exposit the nature of the human person, each age reflecting a particular period in a person's life. The first age, from Adam to Noah, “was wiped out in the universal Flood, just as the first age of every person is usually submerged in oblivion.”³⁸ The second age, from Noah to Abraham, was “the childhood of God's people, and therefore it is discovered in a language, that is, in Hebrew, because from childhood on...a person begins to learn to speak.”³⁹ The third age, from Abraham to David, “was like the adolescence of the people of God, because from this age on, a person can reproduce.”⁴⁰ The fourth age, from David to the exile in Babylon, was the age of youth, during which “the era of kings began among the people of God, for this age in man is normally apt for governing a kingdom.”⁴¹ The fifth age, from the Babylonian exile to the advent of Christ, was the age of maturity, for in this age “the Hebrew people were weakened by many evils, as if wearied by heavy age.”⁴² The sixth age, now in progress, “is not fixed according to any sequence of generations or times, but like senility, this [Age] will come to an end in the death of the whole world.”⁴³ Coterminal with the sixth age is the seventh age of rest for those who “by a happy death” have overcome the ages of the world and will be “received into the Seventh Age of perennial rest,” which will finally be followed by “the Eighth Age of the blessed Resurrection.”⁴⁴

of literature meditating on the theological significance of the six days of creation, a tradition expressed in hexameron treatises written by Basil of Caesarea and Ambrose. See Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, S.J. [New York: 1982]); Ambrose, *Hexameron*, trans. John J. Savage (Washington, DC: 2003); Basil, *On the Hexameron*, trans. Agnes Clare Way (Washington, DC: 1963).

37 *Temp. ratione*, 66 (Wallis, 157).

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Ibid.*, 66 (Wallis, 158).

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*

We see an additional dimension to Bede's understanding of the six ages of history in his commentary *On Genesis*. Like *The Reckoning of Time*, Bede's *On Genesis* borrows extensively from Augustine. In his commentary on Genesis 1 there is a discernible pattern characterized by the contrast between darkness and light. This contrast is basic to Bede's understanding of creation and redemption. Quoting Augustine, Bede writes:

*Why is it unsuitable, if the origins of mundane matter were dark, that what was made would be rendered better with approaching light, and that the condition of man advancing, so to speak, toward a more perfect state, what was to be afterwards, would be signified in this way, according to the explanation of the Apostle, who says, For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shined in your hearts? Hence, he elsewhere says, You were heretofore darkness, but now light in the Lord—the one who, when darkness was upon the face of the abyss, said, Let there be light, and light was made.*⁴⁵

This darkness-light contrast is definitive for the Augustinian understanding of the progression of time, both in creation and redemption. There also an implicitly anthropological dimension to this progression. Augustine repeatedly sets creation and redemption in a parallel relationship. The "origins of mundane matter were dark" and where subsequently "rendered better with approaching light." Humankind was to advance toward perfection in the same way: "You were heretofore darkness, but now light in the Lord." The progression from darkness to light that characterizes creation itself is reflected in the moral progress of the human race. God created light itself in order to draw creation away from primal darkness. Likewise, the progression of time is now marked by light: "Along with the increase of light, the formation of the lights offered as a divine gift to the world the fact that they could mark off division of the flow of time."⁴⁶ On account of sin, however, the six ages of history, whereby time is marked, are characterized alternating periods of light and darkness, reflecting the "morning" and "evening" of the six days creation. The first day, during which created light corresponds to the first age of the world, humankind was created and placed in the garden. After they had been expelled from paradise on account of sin, "full evening arrived" when "the whole *earth was corrupted* by the increasingly frequent sins of the human race *before God, and was filled*

45 *In Genesis*, 1.6 (*On Genesis*, trans. Calvin B. Kendall [Liverpool: 2008], 71).

46 *Ibid.*, 1.15 (Kendall, 81).

*with iniquity.*⁴⁷ On the second day, God created the firmament in the middle of the waters. In like manner, during the second age God placed the ark in the middle of the deluge. Full evening for this age arrived after the construction of the tower of Babel, “when the fellowship of the human race was torn asunder by the confounding of languages.”⁴⁸ On the third day, God separated the dry lands from the waters and caused green plants to appear. To this corresponds the call of Abraham and the “separation” of the Israelites. As this age progressed toward evening they abandoned the faith of the patriarchs and the law of Moses, being “defiled by the crimes of foreign nations” and “weighed down by slavery.”⁴⁹ Finally, full evening came when this people “was almost completely destroyed by the sword of foreigners.”⁵⁰ On the fourth day, God created the sun, moon, and stars. Likewise, the fourth age saw the reign of such “luminaries” as David and Solomon, the Temple and the prophets. This age began to darken when the kings and the people “spurning the temple and the laws of God, were wasted and torn to pieces by their enemies.”⁵¹ It concluded with “a very oppressive night” when the kingdom was overthrown, the Temple was destroyed, and the people were carried off into captivity in Babylon.⁵² On the fifth day, God created fish, sea creatures, and birds of the air. Likewise, in the fifth age, Israel multiplied in Babylon. Many remained in Babylon, “which is often signified by the word ‘waters.’”⁵³ Many of them lived “like fish in the waters,” while others, “like the great whales, strove rather to master the waves of the age than to be subject to them.”⁵⁴ Still others, “as though receiving the wings of liberty,” returned to the Promised Land and “like birds sought heavenly things with their whole effort.”⁵⁵ In the evening of this age, however, the people “fell apart in civil conflicts among themselves and betrayed their own country to the Romans.”⁵⁶ On the sixth day, God created “cattle, beasts, and creeping things,” and finally “the first Adam, in his own image” and “the woman Eve from his side while he slept.”⁵⁷ The sixth age of the world reveals fullness of this mystery in the history of man. Interestingly, Bede (via Augustine) looks

47 Ibid., 1.36 (Kendall, 101).

48 Ibid (Kendall, 102).

49 Ibid., 1.37 (Kendall, 102).

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid (Kendall, 103).

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., 1.37–38 (Kendall, 103).

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

ahead to the Mosaic law and employs the later distinction between clean and unclean animals as a symbol of the distinction between sinners and saints in the present age. The former are comparable to serpents and beasts "on account of their cruelty and because they clung with their whole mind to earthly cares and allurements."⁵⁸ The latter "knew how to ruminate the word of God in the likeness of clean animals chewing the cud, to maintain the hoof of discretion on the road, to bear the yoke of the good work of the divine law, and to warm the poor from the fleece of their own sheep."⁵⁹ Also during this time "there appeared in the world the second Adam, that is to say, *the mediator between God and men*" from whose side "while he was sleeping on the cross, *came forth blood and water*."⁶⁰ The evening of this age is presently occurring in Bede's own time, "when, *with iniquity abounding everywhere, the charity of many grows cold*."⁶¹ On the seventh day, "*God rested from all his works*."⁶² Likewise, the seventh age "is an age of eternal repose in another life, in which God rests with his saints forever after the good works which he works in them through the six ages of this world."⁶³ There is no evening to the seventh day, "because this seventh age will have no gloom by which it may be terminated."⁶⁴

The Augustinian understanding of history adopted by Bede is characterized by two things. First there is a parallel relationship between the order of creation, the order of redemption, and the ages of an individual person. This parallelism is rooted in Augustine's understanding of the human person as a microcosm. His theology of history is the narrative unfolding of this central truth about the human person. Second, the six ages of history follow an alternating pattern of light and darkness, signified by the "morning" and "evening" of each day. Yet this too has an implicitly anthropological dimension as seen the moral progress of the human race. But the anthropological aspect is expressed in very general terms. Augustine does not apply his schema on a personal level. In the two homilies of Bede which this chapter will examine, both of these characteristics play a determinative role in his understanding of the personal formation of the monk. This personalistic application of the Augustinian schema in Bede's homilies discloses an implicit Christian humanism.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., 1.38 (Kendall, 104).

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 1.39 (Kendall, 104).

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid (Kendall, 105).

2.5 Bede's Gospel Homilies

Bede's homilies were written toward the end of his life, sometime in the 720's. They are clearly intended for a monastic audience and are concerned with the significance of the Gospel stories for the spiritual life of his fellow monks.⁶⁵ What is less than clear is the specific setting and function of Bede's homilies in the life the monastery. The homilies may have been intended for public reading during mealtimes, for use during the Night Office, and perhaps for private devotion.⁶⁶ Their present form seems to indicate that they were intended to be read on specific days throughout the liturgical year, something characteristic of medieval homilies.⁶⁷ They were intended primarily to be read aloud, and not necessarily by the author himself.⁶⁸ In this capacity Bede's homilies continued to enjoy extensive use well beyond Bede's own life and beyond the confines of Anglo-Saxon England. Charlemagne commissioned Paul the Deacon to compile a homiliary of readings for the Night Office of Sundays and feast days, instructing Paul to assemble "certain flowers from the wide-flung fields of the Catholic fathers."⁶⁹ Paul's compilation included thirty-four of Bede's Gospel homilies, the greatest contribution of any single author, and it was this homiliary that became standard in the Western Church for many centuries.⁷⁰

Two of Bede's homilies in particular show the integration of the six ages of history with the personal formation of the monk. The first of these is Bede's homily after Epiphany on John 2:1–11.⁷¹ The pericope is the wedding feast of Cana and centers on the six hydrias (water jars) containing the water Jesus changed into wine. Bede's interpretation borrows heavily from Augustine's *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, giving them a monastic application that reveals his implicit humanism. For Augustine, water represents the law and the prophets, while the wine represents their fulfillment in the Gospel: "The water is changed into wine, so that we may get a taste of Christ, already revealed in the

65 Introduction, Bede the Venerable, *Homilies on the Gospels*, vol. 1, trans. Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst, OSB (Kalamazoo: 1991), xi. The Latin text used in this study is Bede's *Homiliae* in *Patrologia Latina*, (ed.) J-P. Migne (Paris: 1854), 94:009–516A.

66 Ibid., xii.

67 Ibid., xiii.

68 Ibid., xii.

69 Ibid., xiv.

70 Ibid., xv.

71 *In dominica secunda post epiphaniam*, PL 94:68–74 (Homily 14 in Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, vol. 1, trans. Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst, OSB [Kalamazoo, MI: 1991], 134–46).

law and the prophets.”⁷² Augustine also provides an age-by-age interpretation of the six hydrias according to the prophecies first given to Israel and later extended to all nations. In the first age, he focuses on Adam and Eve, particularly the text “Therefore shall a man leave father and mother and shall cling to his wife; and they shall be two in one flesh.” Adam leaving his mother signifies Christ leaving his “mother” the synagogue and cleaving unto the Church, his bride: “How did he leave the mother? By leaving the Synagogue of the Jews, in which he was born according to the flesh, and by clinging to the Church which he has gathered together from all peoples. So then, the first water jar also held a prophecy about Christ.”⁷³ In the second age, Christ is seen in Noah and the ark: “Why, after all, were all animals included in the ark, if not to represent all peoples?”⁷⁴ The third age focuses on Abraham, in whose seed “shall all the peoples be blessed” and whose son “carried the wood for the sacrifice to which he was being led to be himself the victim offered.”⁷⁵ In the fourth age, David signifies the universalization of prophecy in the psalm “Arise, God, judge the earth, since it is you that will inherit in all the peoples (Ps 81:8).”⁷⁶ The fifth age centers on Daniel, who witnessed a stone cut from a mountain “not by hands” and which grew and became “a great mountain, such that it filled the whole face of the earth.”⁷⁷ The stone cut without hands is Christ born of a virgin; the mountain represents his kingdom, and “we can already observe it occupying the whole world.”⁷⁸ In the sixth age, the representative figure is John the Baptist, who chastised the Jewish leaders for boasting of their lineage in Abraham without showing “fruit worthy of repentance.”⁷⁹ This too is a prophecy fulfilled in the Church composed of the nations: “We come from the nations; but we would not come from the nations unless God had raised up children to Abraham from stones. We became children of Abraham by imitating his faith, not by birth in the flesh.”⁸⁰

Bede adopts this basic schema, but alters it significantly, reflecting his concern for the personal formation of his monks. Whereas for Augustine, the “water” represents Old Testament prophecy, for Bede the water symbolizes the

72 *Homily 9 in Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Edmund Hill, OP, trans., in *Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: 2009), 187–188.

73 *Ibid.*, 191.

74 *Ibid.*, 192.

75 *Ibid.*, 193.

76 *Ibid.*

77 *Ibid.*, 194.

78 *Ibid.*, 195.

79 *Ibid.*

80 *Ibid.*

moral teaching found in scripture throughout the six ages of history. Thus, for Bede, the “water” of the Old Testament is not entirely superseded by the “wine” of the New Testament, but has an abiding influence in the spiritual life. He writes:

Water represents knowledge of sacred scripture, which both cleanses its hearers from the stain of sins, and gives [them] drink from the font of divine cognition. The six vessels in which it was contained are the devout hearts of the holy (*corda devota sunt sanctorum*), whose perfection of life and faith was set before the human race as an example of believing and living properly through the six ages of this transitory world (*per sex saeculi labentis aetates*), up to the time of the Lord’s preaching.⁸¹

The transformation of the water into wine, in turn, signifies some aspect of the Paschal Mystery. Thus the water represents the moral interpretation of scripture, while the wine represents the allegorical. Bede then applies this dual-faceted interpretation to the six ages of history and their significance for the spiritual formation of his monks. In the first age, Abel was murdered by Cain on account of envy. Abel, “received praise for his righteousness...while the wicked slayer of his brother suffered the penalty of an eternal curse.”⁸² Bede then provides the moral interpretation:

There are people who, when they hear about this, become apprehensive that they will be damned with the wicked, and, longing to be blessed with the holy, they cast off all that might enkindle hatred and envy and take care to please God through a sacrifice of justice, modesty, innocence, and patience. Such as these unquestionably find in the scriptures a vessel full of water from which they may rejoice that they have been beneficently cleansed and given drink.⁸³

Bede then gives the allegorical interpretation:

But if anyone understands the murderer Cain as the Jews’ lack of faith, the killing of Abel as the passion of the Lord and Savior, and the earth which opened its mouth and received [Abel’s] blood from Cain’s hand as the Church (which received, in the mystery of its renewal, the blood of

81 *In dominica secunda post epiphaniam* (Martin and Hurst, 137–38).

82 *Ibid* (Martin and Hurst, 139).

83 *Ibid*.

Christ poured out by the Jews), undoubtedly they [who have this understanding] find water turned into wine.⁸⁴

Thus, the first hydria contains a twofold symbolism. On the moral level, it symbolizes the moral life of those who fear to sin in their hearts as Cain did with his hands. On the allegorical level, it signifies (despite Bede's unfortunate anti-Judaism) the sacrifice of Christ and the reception of his saving blood by the Church. The successive ages follow this same pattern: a moral interpretation symbolized by water, followed by an allegorical interpretation signified by wine. In the second hydria we see the second age, in which Noah, along with his family, "was delivered in the ark on account of his righteousness," which symbolizes those who desire "to be delivered with the elect."⁸⁵ The "wine" interpretation points to "the ark as the Church," and "Noah as Christ," while the "the water which washed away sinners" is "the waters of baptism."⁸⁶ The third hydria signifies the third age, the age of Abraham. The central feature of Abraham is his obedience to God's command that he sacrifice Isaac. "Behold" writes Bede, "[here] you have the third hydria, for when you hear that a greater obedience is repaid by a greater prize, you yourself [will] attempt to learn and to possess obedience."⁸⁷ The allegorical sense of Abraham's obedient sacrifice, of course, is "the passion of the one concerning whom the Father says, *'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.'*"⁸⁸ The fourth age, symbolized by the fourth hydria, concerns the kingdom of David, who responded with humility to Saul's persecution. Whoever "begins to strive after humility and innocence and to drive pride and envy from his heart, has, as it were, found a draught of the clearest water."⁸⁹ Allegorically, Saul represents "the persecuting Jews" who forfeited the kingdom on account of their unbelief, while David signifies "Christ and the Church" whose reign "will always remain."⁹⁰ Here Bede makes the personal application explicit. If the hearer recognizes this symbolism, "he will perceive a cup of wine made from the water, for he will know that he is reading not only about that king but about his own life and reign."⁹¹ In the fifth age, symbolized by the fifth hydria, after the return from the Babylonian captivity

84 Ibid (Martin and Hurst, 139–40).

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

Jesus, high priest and son of Josedec, led the Jews back to the Promised Land where they rebuilt the Temple, “which had been burned down, and the holy city, which had been destroyed.”⁹² Morally, one “has been cleansed by the water of the purifying hydria” if one “is seized by fear of sinning and flees to the remedy of repenting.”⁹³ Allegorically, Jerusalem and the Temple refer to the Church, Babylon is “the confusion of sinners,” while Nebuchadnezzar is the devil, and Jesus the Temple high priest is “the eternal high-priest Jesus Christ.”⁹⁴ Finally, in the sixth hydria, representing the sixth and present age of history, we see Jesus Christ appearing in the flesh. In this connection Bede emphasizes Christ’s submission to the Old Testament law: “On the eighth day after his nativity he was circumcised in accordance with the law; on the thirty-third day after this he was brought to the temple, and the offerings stipulated by the law were made for him.”⁹⁵ The moral sense of this passage is seen the sixth hydria, “for cleansing the contagion of sin, for giving drink from the joys of life, and for bringing cleaner flowing waters to others.”⁹⁶ Bede then gives an elaborate allegorical interpretation, focusing on the eighth day circumcision and the thirty-third day offering in the Temple:

But in the circumcision of the eighth day you may understand baptism, which has redeemed us from the death of our sins into the mystery of the Lord’s resurrection. In [Jesus’] being lead into the temple and the offering of the sacrificial victims of purification, you may recognize a prefiguration of any of the faithful entering from the baptistry to the holy altar and needing to be consecrated by an exceptional sacrificial victim, the Lord’s body and blood. [If you have this understanding of the story], you have been granted wine made from the water, and it is a most undiluted wine.⁹⁷

At this point, as if to follow the pattern of history to its logical completion, Bede interprets the circumcision and Temple offering anagogically. The eighth day of circumcision is a symbol “of the general resurrection of the human race,” while the entering in to the Temple “with sacrificial offerings” is a symbol of “the time after the resurrection when the universal judgment is finished,

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid (Martin and Hurst, 142).

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid (Martin and Hurst, 142–3).

97 Ibid.

and the saints, then made incorruptible, will enter with their offerings of good works to contemplate forever the form of divine majesty."⁹⁸ This too, according to Bede, is a miraculous instance of "wine made from the water."⁹⁹ Thus the Lord "out of his bounty granted six ages of saving wisdom in the world."¹⁰⁰

This "saving wisdom," which Bede discloses according to the pattern of the six ages of history, ultimately serves the moral and spiritual formation of his audience. Returning again to the central theme of the homily, Bede writes "Let us love with our whole mind, dearly beloved brothers, the marriage of Christ and the Church, which was prefigured then in one city and is now celebrated over the whole earth."¹⁰¹ He urges his fellow monks to "make the strong vessels of our hearts clean by faith, according to the purification [demanded by] heavenly commands."¹⁰² As a logical conclusion of Bede's conviction that the human person is a microcosm of human history, the six hydrias, heretofore symbolizing the six ages of history, now come to be identified with the hearts of the monks. Bede urges his monks to internalize the mysteries contained in the six ages, and direct them toward their own spiritual growth. The wisdom contained in these six ages/hydrias should warm them "with the fervor of [the Lord's] charity...so that we can become spiritually drunk" with "*the wine of compunction*."¹⁰³ Thus, the moral, allegorical, and finally the anagogical meanings of the hydrias, all of which represent at the same time the ages of history and the hearts of the faithful, provide wisdom for the personal and spiritual formation of the monk. This moral and spiritual application is made possible by the congruence of the ages of history and Bede's view of the human person as a microcosm.

We also see the six ages of history in Bede's homily on the Easter Vigil.¹⁰⁴ Here he employs Augustine's darkness-to-light pattern, applying it to the spiritual formation of the person. The biblical text is the resurrection narrative in Matthew (28:1–10). Bede discovers in Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday symbols of the six ages, the seventh age of rest, and the eighth age of eternity:

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid (Martin and Hurts, 145).

102 Ibid.

103 Ibid (Martin and Hurst, 146). The italicized quote is from Psalm 60:3.

104 *In vigilia paschae*, PL 94:133–9 (Homily 7 in Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, vol. 2, trans. Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst, OSB [Kalamazoo, MI: 1991]).

He was crucified on Friday, rested in the sepulcher on Saturday, and rose from the dead on Sunday, indicating to his elect that they must toil by good works throughout the six ages of this world amid the dangers of persecutions, and that they should hope for a [period of] rest for their souls in the next life, [enjoying] a kind of perpetual sabbath.¹⁰⁵

Bede then discusses the significance of the order of time on the morning of the resurrection. Bede observes in the words of the evangelist a departure from the ordinary way of speaking: "*On the sabbath evening which was growing on toward the dawn of Sunday.*"¹⁰⁶ The ordinary order of time "would have the evening darkening into night, rather than growing on toward dawn."¹⁰⁷ This is the pattern of the six ages of history in Augustine's *On Genesis*. However, the night of the Easter Vigil has a unique significance for Bede. He tells us that the evangelist indicates "the great dignity this most sacred night acquired from the glory [of our Lord's] victory over death."¹⁰⁸ Christ, "who rose [from the dead] during the final part of the night," illuminated the night "by the light of his resurrection."¹⁰⁹ In so doing, Christ upset the conventional order of time itself. Bede writes:

From the beginning of the world's creation until this time, the course of time was so divided that day preceded night, according to the order of its primeval making. On this night, because of the mystery of our Lord's resurrection, the order of time was changed. He rose from the dead during the night, and on the following day he showed the effects of his resurrection to his disciples... Most properly was night joined to the light of the following day, for by sinning the human race fell away from the light of paradise into the darkness and hardships of this age. It is appropriate that day follow night now, when through faith in the resurrection we are led back from the darkness of sin and the shadow of death to the light of life by Christ's gift.¹¹⁰

Having set forth the significance of inverted time, Bede immediately provides a moral application. As the darkness of the night has been illumined by the brightness of Christ's resurrection, the darkness of their hearts must also be

105 Ibid (Martin and Hurst, 58).

106 Ibid (Martin and Hurst, 60).

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid.

illuminated. The heart of the monk must demonstrate this reverse progression from night to day: "All of it should become light as day for us."¹¹¹

Later in the homily Bede discusses the connection between Easter Vigil and the Jewish Passover. "We should note" he writes, "that the solemnity of this most sacred night...was already once mysteriously represented among the ancient people of God."¹¹² When discussing the Jewish feast, he repeatedly emphasizes the fact that their deliverance came at night. God's people were commanded "to immolate a lamb and to roast and eat its flesh during this night."¹¹³ They were to wait, "being watchful for the hour of their redemption," which occurred with the Lord coming "in the middle of this night."¹¹⁴ "The redemption of that people" writes Bede, "unquestionably bore within it a type of our spiritual redemption, which was brought to completion on this night by our Lord's rising from the dead."¹¹⁵ Bede focuses on the significance of the blood of the paschal lamb being smeared on the lintels and doorposts of the Israelites: "This fourfold division of blood was to represent the four-pronged standard of our Lord's passion by which we who have been signed are set free."¹¹⁶ "Just as after the lamb had been immolated on this night in Egypt" and God came and delivered Israel from their enemies, in like manner did Christ "overthrow the might of the devil and his minions."¹¹⁷ Bede continues:

He broke open the bulwarks of the lower world, rescued those of his elect who were held there (albeit in a state of repose), and, by rising from the dead on this very night, brought them to the joys of the heavenly kingdom.¹¹⁸

Again, the parallel Bede underscores here is the significance of the "night" of redemption. Bede uses the last point to make the transition to the conclusion of the homily: "Let us celebrate the new people of spiritual adoption, taken away from Egyptian domination, to the one true Lord at the font of regeneration."¹¹⁹ Finally, he applies "the mysteries of our Lord's resurrection" to the interior, moral development of his brother monks:

¹¹¹ Ibid (Martin and Hurst, 61).

¹¹² Ibid (Martin and Hurst, 65).

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid (Martin and Hurst, 66).

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid (Martin and Hurst, 67).

Let us strive, dearly beloved, to lay of hold of these mysteries by the interior love of our minds, and always keep a grasp of them by living them. Let us preserve them like clean animals, at one time ruminating by murmuring them with our mouths, at another recollecting them in the inner recesses of our hearts. And above all, let us take care to conduct our lives, with actions by which we may merit to behold joyfully the outcome of our own resurrection too.¹²⁰

Here we see again Bede's focus on the formation of the whole person, interior and exterior. The mysteries of the Easter Vigil are to be externally ruminated with the mouth and internally recollected by the mind. In addition to this inward-outward recollection-rumination, the monk is to manifest these mysteries in his life and conduct. This inward-outward harmony of the person reflects the emphasis upon inward-outward sanctity found in the *Rule* of St. Benedict. In terms of Bede's historical schema, the interior life of the monk must be conformed to the pattern of darkness progressing toward light, a progression that subverts the ordinary order of historical time that is the result of sin. The monk's conduct should reflect the good works of the elect that are performed throughout the six ages of the world in preparation for the age of eternal rest.

2.6 Conclusion

In the two homilies we have examined, Bede employs Augustine's six ages of history in order to urge his audience toward that intense personal and spiritual growth that characterizes the monastic life. Each of the ages of history corresponds to a particular period in the growth and maturity of a person. There is thus a profound connection, even identity, between the nature of the person and the nature of human history, at the heart of which is the microcosmic view of the human person. For Bede, history unfolds the microcosmic nature of the human person in relation to the created order and sets forth the mystery of redemption as it affects human nature. Combined with biblical exegesis and homily, history serves the personal formation of the monk by illuminating and unfolding the microcosmic the human person on the levels of creation and redemption. The six ages of history thereby serve to bring the monk to personal and spiritual completion. We see then, that Bede understands the six ages of human history as fundamentally ordered to the renewal of the person.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

In the monastic setting within which he delivers his homilies, Bede exhorts his brother monks to ruminate on the mystery of human history in the same manner in which they would meditate on other aspects of the Christian faith, a *lectio divina* wherein the sacred text is the narrative of salvation history. Such rumination facilitates the full recovery the inward and outward faculties of the person, restoring within the person a genuine spiritual freedom and orienting them to the ultimate goal of monastic life: eternal life. In light of these considerations, we can say with confidence that Bede is a genuine, if rudimentary, Christian humanist for his time.